



A HOLLYWOOD STORY



Los Angeles, in all its glamour and glitz, continues to capture travel journalist **Leo Bear**'s heart, as she revisits the city she fell in love with five years ago, and finds out the latest places to stay for a truly unique experience to remember

STORY



Crunching along a sandy path cutting a swirl in the rugged canyon in the Hollywood hills, I nod and smile at each of the passers-by because that's the etiquette in California. My fellow hikers are mostly in pairs, chatting away, smiling. Some of the male hikers have six-packs on display, designer hoodies tied around their waists, and a few of them have fluffy handbag-sized dogs at their heels. It's hard to keep your eyes on as the track the views are so impressive – and it's not just the beautiful people. There's the Hollywood sign to my left, and below, downtown Los Angeles stretches out all the way to the Atlantic Ocean – skyscrapers glinting, everything in miniature. I'm descending from the top of Runyon Canyon, a hiking trail frequented by starlets and studio bosses, and the mercury is rising. It's approaching 28°C – not bad for January.

As the sun arcs into its highest position, I rest against a fence and watch as a yoga class commences. The genetically blessed teacher strides in, folds away a well-thumbed film script and unrolls her matt. What a cliché: the yoga teacher waiting for a callback.

Los Angeles. The town where dreams are made or destroyed. Lucky for me, my dreams were made here.

Several years ago, I spent 12 months working in Hollywood as a stringer for a newspaper. Unshackled from my desk job, days were filled with red-carpet interviews and movie screenings, and nights were wild and wonderful, spent dancing 'til dawn in mansions in the hills – many I later recognise as backdrops in films. It was on one of these martini-fuelled evenings that I met a dashing British TV producer who loved LA as much as I did, and knew how to make a decent cup of tea.

Flash-forward five years, and he and I were returning to our beloved City of Angels as husband and wife. We called up our old acquaintances, booked tables in our favourite restaurants and rented an absurdly posey convertible car. But instead of lining up a hotel, I

British company that arranges short stays in private homes – an upmarket Airbnb if you like. The promise of living like locals was deeply alluring, and pulling up outside our picture-perfect West Hollywood cottage was a real 'coming home' moment. A dove-grey two-bedroom house in a leafy residential street walking distance from Runyon Canyon, it had all the appeal of a private home with none of the hassle. While I cooed over the pretty wooden porch and white picket fence, my other half headed into the garden to inspect the lemon and cumquat trees. We had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a large kitchen and a light-filled living room hung with Andy Warhol prints, all

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to ourselves – there was even a cinema room.

Of course, some of the owner's art and furniture wasn't to our taste, but the attention to detail provided by One Fine Stay more than compensated. Bed corners were tucked as tightly as you'd find in any five-star establishment and bathrooms came kitted out with fresh-laundered towels and Kiehl's products. After being given the grand tour by one of One Fine Stay's smiling reps and given the keys, we were handed an iPhone for the duration of our stay loaded with local restaurants, bars and things to do – all chosen by the owners. For everything else, we were told to call the One Fine Stay 'concierge' available 24/7. Genius.

The idea for One Fine Stay was conceived by former venture-capitalist Greg Marsh, who upon leaving his Mayfair office one evening happened to notice the lights were off in his street. 'Every single one of the homes was empty,' he recalls, 'so the notion of providing a service that would let guests stay in these homes while their

LEAD IMAGE: MONTAGE (DOUBLE ROOMS FROM \$695 PER NIGHT (MONTAGEHOTELS.COM); LEFT: MONTAGE; FAR LEFT: THE LONDON WEST HOLLYWOOD

RIGHT: ONE FINE STAY.
ALL IMAGES FAR RIGHT:
THE LONDON WEST
HOLLYWOOD

→ owners were out of town was so compelling to me – both as a home-owner and as a traveller who dislikes generic hotel rooms – that I simply had to act on it.’

Six years on, and Marsh and his team have access to some of the most elegant and quirky properties in Los Angeles, London and Paris – each one handpicked and serviced by a legion of hotel-trained staff. The very best homes can be found in the company’s ‘prestige collection’. A quick glance at the LA section reveals a stylish mid-century house designed by architects Buff and Hensman that comes with an outdoor pool, 24-foot walnut counter and retractable walls for entertaining. Or there’s a property in the arty district of Venice Beach with a chemical-free lap pool, projector room and outdoor hot tub, owned by a well-known photographer and his wife. The price tag? Around \$1,500 a night.

Our digs were far less grand but no less wonderful. As soon as we’d settled in, we hosted a jubilant dinner party with the old gang, and spent the following days in a carefree state of Californian abandon cruising around town,

‘Marsh and his team have access to some of the most elegant and quirky properties in Los Angeles’

hiking in Runyon Canyon, shopping at the Hollywood farmers market and trying out the latest fitness crazes (Pure Barre and SoulCycle won joint best). We quickly fell into the owners’ lifestyles and even started to become quite envious of them. Truly, we found the benefits of a homestay to be limitless. Being able to entertain ‘at home’ is one thing but having several rooms to spread out in and our own off-road parking was priceless. Then, when it came to ‘checking out’, we just locked up quietly, left the keys in a safety deposit box and waved goodbye to the neighbours.



With a few days remaining before our return to British soil, there was time to bed-test some of the city’s newest hotels for contrast. First we checked into The Montage Beverly Hills, a classic grand-dame hotel with a splendid spa, diamond-throwing distance from the best boutiques on Rodeo Drive. Location-wise, it’s hard to beat. Add in a smart rooftop restaurant and impeccable service – I’ve never known room service to be so quick – and it’s easy to see why Dylan Jones, editor of *GQ* magazine, never stays anywhere else. But fantastic as it is, The Montage is very, for want of a better word, ‘hotel-y’.

A suite at The London West Hollywood, on the other hand, is about as close as you’ll get to apartment living without taking out a mortgage. Designed by the studio behind the late great David Collins (Claridges, The Wolseley, The Berkeley and the newly revamped The Ivy) it’s glitzy yet serene with a handsome palette of sage, brass and quartz. The British influence doesn’t end there. Guests can telephone friends back home in London for free, so long as it’s to a landline, and the hotel’s prestigious ‘Gate

suites’ are inspired by Hyde Park.

Lounging by the pool, watching the occasional flutter-buzz of a helicopter across clear Californian skies, one feels a world away from the grit and glamour of the Sunset Strip a few storeys below, yet the hotel is conveniently placed equidistant between Chateau Marmont and Soho House Hollywood – two of the city’s hottest hangouts.

Before heading to the airport, I was privy to a sneak preview of a brand-new penthouse under construction on the top floor of the hotel. When complete, it promises to be the largest crashpad in the city with a private rooftop pool, wraparound terrace and its own hi-tech gym. Anyone who can stump up the funds to make an advance booking is guaranteed one hell of a fine stay. But they won’t get their own white picket fence. ☑

Leo’s trip to Los Angeles was arranged by luxury online travel company Gadabouting (gadabouting.com) and she was a guest of One Fine Stay (onefinestay.com) and Montage (montagehotels.com). The London West Hollywood (thelondonwesthollywood.com)

